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ABSTRACT

A two-week writing workshop has been designed and conducted for gifted students in grades three through five. Specific activities have been planned to enable learners to write for a variety of purposes, to learn about many categories of writing, and to come into contact with different kinds of information through listening, discussion, and reading many kinds of materials. The activities, provided during daily 90-minute sessions, require students to write for a ten-minute period on the first day of the workshop to produce writing samples, write for two-minute periods about whatever comes into their minds, produce lists of objects that have something in common, generate questions for which the answer is a word that has been provided by the teacher, substitute alternative words for selected words in sentences, work on long term articles or stories, share work with classmates and teacher, rewrite and edit, and work on closing activities on the last day of the workshop. The workshop appears to benefit students' reading through providing them with complex reading materials and a purpose for reading. (A list of workshop materials is appended.) (GW)

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Writing Workshops and Reading

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The focus in these specific writing workshops is the superior student, that learner who, for whatever systematic or conservational reason becomes certified as a high achiever or gifted learner. It was with such students in mind that the writing workshops were conceived and conducted.

As special educators whose responsibility is Gifted Education, and in a role of volunteer and teacher in a local school, the authors' concern for writing was translated into systematic learning to write formats appropriate for classroom use. The formats ranged from year-long "activity units" (Teaching for Thinking, 1977)to shorter "workshops". The two week workshop is presented in this paper based upon experience with its conduct at levels three through five in three schools with nine different groups of learners.

The two week workshops are fundamentally responses to several needs that have emerged in the authors' (and reportedly many other teachers) experience with writing instruction. The needs are reflected in the following objectives for the workshops.

OBJECTIVE: LEARNERS WILL EXPERIENCE THE OPPORTUNITY TO WRITE FOR A JRPOSE.

Writing behavior can be partially defined, at least, as concerted effort. Since people learn to write essentially by writing, the instructional strategy in a writing program, and almost exclusively in the author's workshops, is

CS204 336

writing behavior. We think that if learners are expected to exert the effort demanded by writing behavior, they deserve to have a purpose. Furthermore, the purpose should relate to learner-like needs, not necessarily teacher-like needs. The purposes included the following:

1) writing each day on one workshop-long project, that effort to become a credible production in which the writer can take pride;
2) power writing each day, words to be tallied and a graph to be kept that shows learner growth in one dimension of writing skill;
3) rewriting on regular occasions, that directed at clarification, from the learner's perspective, of already published material;
4) diary and letter writing, the former a message to self and the latter a message to the teacher; and
5) writing for peer review-and-edit experience where pieces are written specifically for distribution to peers for feedback.

Certainly there are other viable purposes for writing; those listed above were directly articulated to workshop participants and proved to provide sufficient purpose to keep the learners writing.

OBJECTIVE: LEARNERS WILL EXPERIENCE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT DEFINES WRITING WITHIN A TOTAL LANGUAGE CONTEXT, OTHER DIMENSIONS OF THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT MILIEU VIEWED AS THE MEANS FOR GENERATING KNOWLEDGE.

Just as people do not write without purpose, people also do not write in an informational vacuum. The writing workshop is an environment in which learners engage in activities designed to build an ever increasing knowledge base.

Each writing workshop session features new, practically new, or differently conceived information. This is achieved through listening, discussion, and reading. A sizeable collection of relatively short materials are made

available in wide ranging topics and at wide ranging reading levels. These include magazines typicaliy not found in the elementary school: Scientific American, airline magazines, research journals, the United States Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, printed speeches and essays and short stories found in secondary and college level anthologies. These reading requirements are placed before learners with the expectation that they will read some, browse others, rewrite a few, discuss some selected by the group, all for the dual purposes of gathering information and directly experiencing what publishable writing looks like.

Each day there is a discussion, on some days dealing with controversy, functioning mainly from news media editorials, but on occasion from ideas picked up from legal materials. Other discussions focus on writing styles designed to fulfill certain purposes. Other topics include the characteristics of selected writers, word selection, arrangement and paragraph analysis in selected published writings.

Attention is paid to various kinds of writing. How, for example, is the discourse in a law journal different from that in Mainliner (United Airlines) and Scientific American?

One additional element of information or knowledge gathering occurs each day in the writing workshop. We refer to the technology of writing where that ranges from simple concepts of tense agreement to the complexities of arranging multiple idea units in sentences and paragraphs. Much of this focus is treated as single, double, and triple sentence sessions (Teaching for Thinking, 1977), and paragraph construction (Addendum IV Teaching for Thinking).

OBJECTIVE: LEARNERS WILL EXPERIENCE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT SERVES THE PURPOSE OF PROVIDING CONTACT WITH WRITING IDEAS.

When a fourth grade student announces, "I don't know what to write about." or "I can't think of how to start.", we might entertain the possibility that (s)he is stating an honest fact and not necessarily trying to avoid effort. The former being the case, writing workshops should assume a responsibility for providing something to write about.

We have found, as have many readers, that lists of story starters, unfinished sentences, and stacks of pretty pictures do not constitute a sufficiently full range of content about which to write. We group this area of consideration (content) in the following way.

1) Electronic media - film, filmstrip, tape, etc.

2) Common print media - story books, sentence stems, etc.

3) Uncommon print media - Constitution, sophisticated journals, etc.

4) Problems - rewriting material in #3 above for consumption by a younger.

5) Argument - learner takes issue with... (we had an excellent one here as a fifth level group got into child pornography.)

6) Creative thinking tasks - writing is specifically fluent, elaborative, or imaginative, etc.

7) Writing skill drill - simple, double, and triple sentence sessions.

Each of the seven categories contain many tasks. There are certainly additional categories. Nonetheless, we used those listed above with considerable success, solving the daily problem of "I don't know what to write."

GETTING READY FOR THE WORKSHOP

Set up the writing class for an intense two week period, three times per year, in October, mid-year, and in May. During the two week periods plan to devote approximately ninety minutes per day to the workshop. Under-

stand that you are not seeking professional writers; rather you are directly addressing writing objectives in a realistic and disciplined way.

Gather necessary material the week before the first writing class. You need folders (either manila or construction paper) for learners to collect their written activities. Also make available pencils, lined and scratch paper, index cards, and a wide variety of reading material. Further, it has been useful to bring various audio-visual materials into the workshop, for example, the use of the films FOG and SURFING have proven to be excellent motivators for visualization skill.

Block out ninety workshop minutes* each day for the two week workshop period. Be consistent with this time throughout the workshop period.

I. FIRST DAY

After you have explained the workshop to the class (that they will be writing for two weeks, that they will be working quite hard, learning how to arrange words in various ways to convey various kinds of messages) take a writing sample. The writing sample is important because it will show where your students are at the beginning of the workshop.

The writing sample is conducted in the following fashion. Explain to the learners that they are to write for ten minutes about any subject they choose. List three or four possible subjects on the chalk board (nature, cars, etc.). Explain that they need not be especially concerned about spelling and other mechanics; rather they should be concerned with getting writing on paper. Be sure that they know that they are to write until time is called.

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* Ninety minutes for workshop time includes transition time and all of the other off-task involvements in a classroom. Time designations hereafter account for that.

(Writing samples are scored according to various schemes, one formal scheme can be found in SPARKLING WORDS (Carlson, 19). Collect and date the writing samples.

II. POWER WRITING: Two Minutes

Explain this as a timed exercise in which learners will write whatever comes to their minds. They may write sentences, single words, their names, the alphabet, whatever, but they must write continuously for the two minutes. This work is not edited, but is scored by getting a tally of words from each learner, kept by the learner. Learners will engage in power writing for at least two minutes every day and they will keep a tally of their word production of a self-kept graph.

III. FLUENT THINKING: Ten Minutes

Learners now draw a line beneath their power writing, or take a new sheet of paper in preparation for fluent thinking and writing. This exercise includes the oral as well as written production of lists in response to "how many" questions, or attribute problems. For example, "How many things can you think of that are yellow?", or "What can you see on the inside of a lemon?" You should time the written lists because the necessity of producing ideas under some pressure appears to be an element in the writing experience. For instance, tell learners that they have one minute to list as many things as they can that are long. After the minute, listen to their ideas, then give them the task again in search for new ideas. Listen again, then change tasks. Use perhaps five such tasks each day, three to be written and shared and two to be shared orally.

Within the fluent thinking period, selectively cause learners to place certain words or ideas into written sentences to be shared aloud. (Such single sentence sessions are explained in TEACHING FOR THINKING.)

IV. CURIOSITY THINKING: Ten Minutes

The next exercise is fun and closely associated with some of the kinds of thinking that we attempt to get learners to do when they write. The exercise features curious and productive thinking by causing learners to ask questions in response to answers. For example, "The answer is moon. You ask me specific and descriptive questions for which moon is an appropriate answer." You are seeking and specifically reinforcing responses that cover wide informational territory as in, "What is something that is visible in the night sky, and shines brightly, and has been visited by people from earth? The ten minutes can accomodate as many as six or seven such answer-question sets, two or three written prior to sharing.

V. SENTENCE SLOTTING: Ten Minutes

Learners need their paper and pencils again. Demonstrate on the chalk board how the exercise works by writing a sample sentence - "The horse ran down the hill." Underline the word "horse", explain that this is a subject in the sentence, also called a noun, and that there are many nouns that can fit into that place in the sentence. Generate such words from the class, noticing together how each new word changes the flavor or meaning of the sentence.

After oral sharing learners can write a sample sentence of their own, placing at least five blanks under the nouns in their sentences. They now write possible alternative words on each of their blanks. Such a set-up can be shown on the chalk board.

Six people were running toward the car.

men	house
girls	store
rats	falling star
dogs	door
women	office

Learners should have the opportunity to share their lists, noticing how images change when various words are placed in the slots.

Use the sentence slotting exercise to exemplify other place holders in sentence strings. Hence, learners can manipulate meaning and image by changing words that fit into the slots. That is a large part of the editing chore, and it points up the building block nature of sentence construction.

VI. LONG TERM WRITING PRODUCTIONS: Twenty Minutes

Every day provide learners with time to write on their long term articles or stories. During the twenty minutes make yourself available to help learners with their specific needs. Encourage their use of resources to take care of their own needs.

If it appears during this time that a group of learners needs specific skill help, conduct such sessions. Some of the following special needs have emerged in the past:

1) internal punctuation,
2) beginning sentences with words other than "and" and "the",
3) paragraph construction,
4) run-on sentences,
5) descriptive language,
6) causing writers to write so that a reader will want to read, and
7) use of connector words

Input or review sessions should be placed into another time period during the day. The twenty minute period for long-term production writing should be reserved for learner writing.

VII. SHARING TIME: Ten Minutes

After learners have worked for the twenty minute period, provide time for sharing with classmates and teacher. This is constructive criticism time when people listen to others and make suggestions.

VIII. REWRITING AND EDITING: Twenty Minutes

Periodically (perhaps five times in two weeks) learners take time to read and review published material. Various resources are provided and learners engage in the following kinds of activities:

1) rewrite a paragraph so it can be understood by someone three years younger;

2) write a paragraph that summarizes a published piece;

3) rewrite at least five of the sentences; or

4) explain how a piece could be changed to be more interesting.

IX. TERMINAL ACTIVITIES

The final exercise on the last day of the two week period is another writing sample. This is used as a measure of student progress during the two week workshop.

Close the workshop with disucssion about how it affected learners, what they think they have learned, what they think ought to be included the next time, what should be left out or changed. During this time learners should look over their power writing graphs and their long-term productions. The latter need not be completed in the two week period; they can be worked on throughout the year.

READING CONSIDERATIONS

As was made clear at the outset, the learners for whom we planned and with whom we worked were largely certified as gifted or superior learners. While we do not interpret that as limiting the workshops to gifted learners, the performance expectations described herein tend to be gifted in nature.

One benefit that has consistently emerged from the writing workshops has been their relationship to the reading program. For many teachers of gifted learners, reading is an especially troubling curricular area. After all, we've been trained to consider developmental reading an integral part if not the primary element in the elementary curricular framework. Teachers of gifted learners are often faced with the dilemma (admittedly quite attractive to most of our colleagues) of what to do when 75% of the learners in the room read at least two grade levels above their administrative placement, and as many as a third function at tenth, eleventh, and twelfth levels. Higher level books from the prevailing program usually are brought in, but the learners consume them in short order and won't sit still for the circle sessions on comprehension. Developmental reading in Gifted Education often stumbles along on a hit or miss basis because most of the learners will never constitute a problem come test score time.

The writing workshops have provided a way out of the woods. Because we set up the workshops with our energies directed at writing, we collected resource material without regard for reading ability. Watching the process, however, we noticed a variety of dynamics relevant to reading in Gifted Education.

1) Learners were exposed to and expected to read and respond to a wide variety of printed material, most at best staple bound, within a range of complexity from lower elementary through ad-

vanced graduate levels. Interestingly, while many learners found selected materials very complex, they seldom laid materials down for that reason. They read without regard for administrative grade placement.

2) Materials were always read for a purpose. Almost nothing was specifically assigned. Learners approached reading material with an attitude not usually found in developmental reading experiences, that is, "I need to know something and this might give it to me."

3) There are certain kinds of printed materials which most of us would purposely avoid as simply too complex or too far afield from anything apparently appropriate in the classroom. Such attitudes usually keep those same materials out of our classrooms. By chance, one of the authors had access to both international and domestic law journals and because we wanted learners to respond to controversy from a position of knowledge, we made the language of the law, stylized with precision and atypical terminology and structure, available in the classroom. Interestingly, the legal material appeared to be avoided and approached with no more or less vigor than any other material. The writing workshop afforded learners the opportunity to read enormously complex material for the purpose of accomplishing their tasks.

4) The on-going expectation of formal response to reading material was a benefit that came out of the writing workshops. There were no follow up drills or activities associated with their reading, but their writing performance expectations demanded that they comprehend, interpret, infer, imply, and otherwise formulate responses to reading material.

Because we were looking at something else, the above comments regarding reading are little more than informal observations that the authors made as the workshop progressed. We collected no data to document our observations relative to reading.

Materials

There is now the matter of materials useful for the conduct of writing workshops as described in this paper. The following list reflects months of collection but should not be viewed as necessary or exhaustive. Selections from the list should be considered, however, as should additional items and categories known to the reader.

1) Literature Anthologies
2) Journal - Great Speeches of the Day
3) Bobbs-Merrill Reprints in Science and Social Science
4) Professional Journals in Law, Medicine, Education, Engineering, Social Work and so forth
5) Airline Magazines, most especially American, United, Eastern, PSA, and Ozark
6) Periodicals - Scientific American, Psychology Today, Time, Newsweek, People, and so forth.
7) Biographies of creative people
8) Language and writing texts
9) Publishing specifications - Writer's Digest